

PATENT SPECIFICATION

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COMPLETE SPECIFICATION

Improvements in or relating to the Production of Titanium

We, KAISER ALUMINUM & CHEMICAL CORPORATION, a Corporation organized under the laws of the State of Delaware, United States of America, of 1924, 5 Broadway, Oakland, California, United States of America, do hereby declare the invention, for which we pray that a patent may be granted to us, and the method by which it is to be performed, to be particularly described in and by the following statement:—

This invention relates to a process for producing ductile titanium metal; and, more particularly, to such process wherein titanium chlorides are reduced by a reducing metal to yield high purity titanium metal and volatile chlorides.

Titanium is known to be a metal of great strength and light weight and to be very desirable in construction where these qualities are of particular importance, for instance, in aircraft manufacture. Various methods have been proposed for preparing the pure metal inasmuch as it occurs principally as the oxide, in rocks and ores, those methods including reduction of the oxide with aluminium, electrolysis of the oxide dissolved in fused calcium chloride, and conversion of the Ti values to tetrachloride, followed by direct reduction of titanium chlorides to the metal by reaction with hydrogen or with alkali or alkaline earth metals. The direct reduction of titanium tetrachloride to titanium by reaction with a metal such as magnesium, sodium, potassium or calcium has been so successful commercially as to clearly demonstrate the above advantageous uses for titanium metal.

However, it is a particular problem in this art to make ductile metal of high purity. Some of the known processes yield titanium which contains impurities that render the metal brittle and unworkable; whereas, in other processes, the principal disadvantage is that the impurities, though not so harmful with regard

to ductility, are present in substantial and objectionable amounts and are extremely difficult to remove, requiring, for example, comminution of a mass of titanium product, followed by leaching and/or treatment at higher temperatures to volatilize off the undesired contaminants, such as the halides of the reducing metal. These treatment steps are expensive and time-consuming, resulting in increased costs of production and a high-priced metal. For instance, the grinding step alone is expensive and difficult because titanium is extremely tough, requiring special grinding devices.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a process for producing high purity ductile titanium. It is a further object to provide a process for producing such titanium which is relatively simple and inexpensive, requiring only minimal amounts of an inert gas and which can be carried out under more moderate and easily controlled operating conditions than have hitherto been known. It is a specific object of this invention further to provide a process for producing high purity ductile titanium, free of impurities which would render the metal brittle and nonworkable; and for producing such titanium in compact form which is especially suitable for further melting and fabricating operations.

According to the present invention, ductile titanium metal is produced by heating finely divided aluminium metal and titanium tetrachloride, in the absence of a reactive gas, such as air, at a temperature of from 400° C. to 600° C., preferably from 400° C. to 550° C., to form vaporous or gaseous aluminium chloride and a lower chloride of titanium, or a mixture of lower chlorides of titanium, in solid form. The vaporous aluminium chloride is separately withdrawn. The titanium lower chloride is then intimately mixed with finely divided aluminium metal and the mix-

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Price

ture is heated in an inert atmosphere at a temperature which gradually increases from 500° C. to 1100° C., whereby there are formed titanium metal and vaporous or gaseous aluminium chloride. The finely divided aluminium with which the lower chloride or chlorides of titanium is admixed can be freshly added aluminium but preferably, as will be further explained below, it is unreacted aluminium present in the solid product from the first heating stage; and it can comprise both such unreacted aluminium and a portion of freshly added aluminium. The aluminium chloride in vapour state formed in this second heating step is withdrawn and the titanium metal is separately recovered. The metal which is so produced is in powdered form if the starting materials are powdered or, when agglomerates of the admixed titanium lower chloride and finely divided aluminium metal are heated as described, the titanium metal product is in compact form and is especially adapted to further handling and subjection to melting processes; it is free of contaminants which if present would have caused brittleness and nonworkability. In another embodiment, the final temperature in the first reaction zone can be increased to about 850° C., as will be further described below, which causes the formation of a small amount or minor portion of finely divided titanium metal at that stage of the process. This is sometimes advantageous as, for instance, if the material is to be pelleted or otherwise agglomerated under pressure prior to the final heating stage, because the presence of finely divided titanium metal enables the production of much stronger and denser pellets or agglomerates.

The aluminium metal which is employed herein is substantially free of oxygen, nitrogen or other contaminants which would render the final titanium product brittle and unworkable. The aluminium is finely divided and is preferably of a particle size substantially entirely passing through a No. 200 screen; and advantageously is of particle size substantially entirely passing a No. 325 screen.

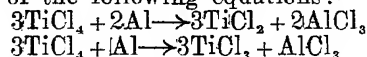
An amount of an inert gas, preferably a noble gas, for example, argon, neon, krypton, xenon or helium or mixtures of these gases, can be introduced into the first reduction zone where titanium tetrachloride is reduced to titanium lower chloride. This introduction of inert gas lowers the partial pressure of titanium tetrachloride, thereby enhancing or increasing the proportion of titanium dichloride, and effecting the formation of

small amounts of titanium metal. At any rate, the reaction is carried on in a hermetically sealed zone and in the absence of air or other reactive gas. The titanium lower chloride produced in this step can be, for example, predominantly trichloride or predominantly dichloride. Usually it is a mixture of the two chlorides and the relative proportions of the two can be varied, for example, as indicated above. An especially advantageous product contains predominantly dichloride with a minor portion of trichloride, wherein the trichloride will probably be converted to dichloride in the next heating step.

The reaction in the first heating step is carried out at a temperature of not over 600° C., preferably not over 550° C., to maintain the powdered aluminium in solid and finely divided state and to avoid any substantial liquefaction of the aluminium, because such liquefaction (which would occur at higher temperatures) has been found to result in the formation of large particles of an intermetallic compound with titanium and/or the agglomeration of the aluminium powder into large particles. The solid aluminium which may remain in the zone is apparently in segregated particles surrounded and insulated from each other by coatings of the titanium lower chloride, so that agglomeration of the aluminium into larger particles or formation of the larger particles of intermetallic compound is substantially prevented. After the desired lower chlorides or chloride has been formed, the solid reaction product can be heated to a higher temperature, that is, up to 850° C., in the absence of titanium tetrachloride, to effect formation of a small amount of titanium metal. In a batch operation, in this variation of the process, the reactants are heated in a reaction zone at the temperatures described to form the lower chlorides, after which the flow of $TiCl_4$ is stopped and the temperature of the reaction zone gradually increased to form a small amount of Ti metal. Likewise, in a variation in a continuous operation, the temperature of the first-stage reaction zone through which the reacting mass flows can be suitably maintained at the range shown, and the product can then be moved through a second reaction stage, in an inert atmosphere, wherein the temperature is varied from 600° C. at the inlet to 850° C. at the exit, to form Ti metal, as desired, as the reaction mass flows to the outlet. The aluminium chloride formed in the reaction, being in vapour state at the temperature employed, is separately withdrawn and can be

cooled and condensed and sent to storage or it can be electrolyzed to recover the aluminium therefrom, and the recovered aluminium when in or reduced to suitable particle size can be again employed in the reaction.

In this first reduction step it is advantageous to control the extent of the reaction, so that the product is a mixture of finely divided aluminium and titanium lower chlorides. It is advantageous, therefore, to employ an excess of finely divided aluminium with respect to the TiCl_4 to be reacted according to one or both of the following equations:—



Conversely, it is advantageous to react slightly more than 50%, stoichiometrically, of the aluminium employed in this step. Stated in another manner, in order to ensure the removal of aluminium in the final stage, the ratio of titanium salts to aluminium in the reaction product of the first stage is such that the quantity of chlorine is at least slightly in excess of the amount stoichiometrically required to combine with the aluminium.

The titanium lower chloride produced in the first heating step is intimately mixed with powdered aluminium prior to introduction into the final heating stage or step. As stated above, for best results this aluminium is that remaining after the first stage heating, the particles thereof being coated and substantially insulated from each other by the lower chloride product. However, if desired, some additional fresh aluminium of the particle size shown above can be added at this mixing step. In the preferred mode of operation, the titanium lower chloride and powdered aluminium from the first heating step are thoroughly mixed together and are then heated in a second heating step at a temperature gradually increasing from 500° C. to 1100° C. It is preferred to agglomerate the mixture prior to this heating step, preferably by briquetting or pelleting under pressure. In this manner a compact metal product is obtained which is more convenient to handle and to subject to further treatment, such as melting. It is particularly advantageous to briquette titanium dichloride containing among other components a small amount of finely divided titanium metal, produced as described above, because it has been found that this produces a stronger briquette and results in a very dense, compact titanium metal agglomerate at the conclusion of the second heating step. The temperature in this heating step is increased gradually from 500° C. to at

least 1000° C. or to 1100° C., in order to allow reaction to proceed progressively to substantial completion. The final heating temperature can be higher than 1000° C. to promote sintering or macro-crystallization and formation of larger, more stable particles of Ti metal. The reaction is believed to be a reduction of the Ti lower chloride by aluminium to form aluminium trichloride and Ti metal. However, if any Ti trichloride is present, it probably in part disproportionates to form TiCl_2 and TiCl_4 , and a small amount of Ti dichloride may also disproportionate to form Ti and TiCl_4 . Any excess TiCl_2 disproportionates at the higher portions of this temperature range (500° C. to 1100° C.); and the final temperature is at least 1000° C., in order also to ensure breakdown of excess TiCl_2 and to remove or vaporize off all chlorides, thereby producing a highly purified titanium metal.

It is an advantage of the present process that aluminium is efficiently employed as a reducing agent in the first heating step; and also in the second heating step. It is a further advantage that only minor amounts of titanium tetrachloride are formed, resulting in fewer problems of recovery and recycle. It is a particular advantage that the aluminium chloride formed in the reactions is volatile at the temperatures of operation, whereas the other products of reaction are not volatile thereat, and therefore the aluminium chloride is efficiently separated from the end product of each reaction.

The annexed drawings represent flow-sheets of modes of carrying out the present process.

In Figure 1 there is provided a source of aluminium powder of the purity described herein. It is introduced into Reactor I, which is the first or primary reaction zone, and there is also introduced a flow of titanium tetrachloride as shown. This reaction zone is maintained at a temperature of from 400° C. to 550° C. to effect reaction to form a lower chloride of titanium and aluminium chloride. The latter is withdrawn as a vaporous product and can be condensed and stored, disposed of as such, or treated to recover aluminium metal for re-use in the process. After the reaction has been initiated by heating to at least the minimum temperature of this range, it is exothermic and cooling is required to maintain the temperatures within the desired range. Advantageously, the mass in the reaction zone is stirred while reaction goes on, to expose fresh aluminium surfaces to the TiCl_4 vapour.

This can be accomplished in any conventional apparatus or device, as known in industry, e.g., a baffled rotary kiln, or a rotating tube device. The solid product of reaction contains the Ti lower chloride or chlorides, any excess aluminium metal and any titanium metal which may have been formed. It is then cooled and is thoroughly mixed. The operations of cooling, mixing and agglomerating are all conducted in a system which is free of air or other reactive gas, which is gas-tight or sealed against entry of air and which can, in a preferred procedure, contain a small amount of inert gas, or be maintained at a pressure slightly above atmospheric to ensure an atmosphere free of air or other reactive gas.

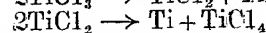
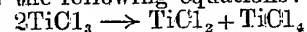
From the mixer the material is conducted to Reactor II, which is the second reaction zone. It is there heated to a temperature which increases gradually from 500° C. to 1000° C. or 1100° C. This rise in temperature is effected slowly in order that the reaction with evolution of aluminium chloride vapour, proceeds uniformly through this temperature range, as can be observed by the flow of vaporous products of reaction out of this zone. An atmosphere and a sweep or flow of inert gas is maintained herein by introducing a gas, preferably a noble gas, for example, argon, into this zone. The vaporous products of reaction comprise principally aluminium chloride with a small amount of titanium tetrachloride derived from partial disproportionation of TiCl_3 or TiCl_2 , or both in this zone, and an amount of inert gas.

In an alternative, and preferable, procedure, the mixed material is briquetted or pelleted, that is agglomerated under pressure, prior to introduction into the second reaction zone. In this manner a compact metal pellet or agglomerate is obtained which is especially suitable for further processing.

In the first reaction zone the reaction proceeds between solid particles of aluminium and gaseous or vaporous titanium tetrachloride and a solid product of reaction deposits on individual aluminium particles. This tends to separate the aluminium particles from each other and to prevent any tendency to agglomerate under the conditions of reaction of the first zone. On the other hand, the deposited crystals of Ti lower chloride or chlorides tend to form a caked mass, and it is preferred, therefore, to break up this cake and thoroughly disperse the unreacted aluminium, in order to enable uniform and complete reduction and utilization of the aluminium metal in

the second reaction zone. It has been considered by previous workers in this field that it is impossible to reduce titanium tetrachloride to the metal with the aid of aluminium efficiently and without the formation of prohibitive amounts of large particles of an intermetallic compound, such as TiAl_3 . It is an advantage of the present invention that, by practicing the steps and the working conditions set forth, reduction by aluminium is enabled to go to substantial completion.

Figure 2 represents another embodiment of the present invention, in flow-sheet form. In this embodiment, aluminium powder of the particle sizes described herein, is introduced into a first reaction zone which is maintained at 400° C. to 550° C. TiCl_4 is vaporized and is then also introduced into this zone (Stage 1) and is there brought into contact with the aluminium metal powder, with stirring. After the exothermic reaction is initiated by suitable heating, it develops sufficient heat that cooling of this zone is effected in order to maintain the temperature within the desired range. The vaporous reaction products, aluminium chloride with possible admixture of a small amount of TiCl_4 and of some argon, when argon is added in this zone, are separately withdrawn as shown. The solid products of reaction are moved forward through this zone and are removed at the exit end and then introduced into Stage 2 where they are heated at a temperature of from 600° C. to 850° C., to form a small amount of titanium metal. This heating may be carried out from two to four hours. Some disproportionation occurs in this stage, according to one or both of the following equations:—



Titanium tetrachloride is withdrawn as a vapour and a small amount of finely divided titanium metal remains in admixture with the principal mass of titanium lower chloride, which at this point is predominantly titanium dichloride. The solid reaction product with excess Al is removed and cooled in a cooling zone as shown, which can be a container or conduit bathed with a cooling water spray. The cooled mass is conveyed to a surge tank, where it is preferably mixed, and thence to briquetting rolls as needed for the Stage 3 reaction.

In Stage 3, the briquetted mass is fed to a second surge tank and from there is fed through valve V into a tower where it is heated slowly to a final temperature of about 1000° C. to 1100° C. Argon is fed in to the tower at the base thereof to maintain an inert atmosphere in the

tower. Vaporous products of the reaction are withdrawn from the top of the tower, and comprise principally aluminium trichloride and a minor portion of titanium tetrachloride, with a small amount of argon admixed therewith also. Titanium pellets are withdrawn as product from the base of the tower, either continuously or intermittently, flow thereof being controlled by the valve V as shown.

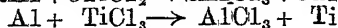
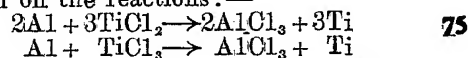
Figure 3 represents a third embodiment of the present invention. Aluminium powder is introduced into a first reaction zone maintained at 400° C. to 850° C. The main source of TiCl_4 is introduced at a point where the reacting mass has reached a temperature of about 600° C. and flows countercurrently to the flow of solids. Inert gas, which may contain TiCl_4 at a partial pressure of up to about 10 to 15 mm. of Hg., is introduced at the end of the apparatus from which the solids are discharged, flows countercurrent to the solids, and mixes with the TiCl_4 introduced as described above. The vaporous products of reaction from this heating stage, reaction zone I, are withdrawn at the portion of the zone where the Al powder is added. The portion of the zone beyond where TiCl_4 is added, that is, which is at a temperature of above 600° C. and rising to about 850° C. at the exit, is substantially free of TiCl_4 and is under a slight sweep of inert gas, preferably argon. The solid product removed at the exit as shown comprises a mixture of titanium lower chlorides, titanium metal and aluminium powder. It is cooled, mixed and is then heated at 500° C. to 1100° C., as previously described. It can be forwarded directly to the reaction zone II and heated to form Ti metal powder, which is at least partially sintered at 1100° C. and which is then preferably maintained under an inert atmosphere until compacted or otherwise stabilized. Preferably, the cooled and mixed product from reaction zone I is agglomerated under pressure and then introduced to reaction zone II for further reaction, to form a compact Ti metal agglomerate.

As a further illustration of the mode of carrying out this process, describing more particularly the amounts and kinds of reactants and the procedural steps, there is given the example below.

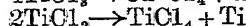
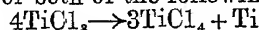
EXAMPLE

Titanium tetrachloride is passed concurrently over solid finely divided aluminium, passing a No. 200 mesh and a substantial proportion passing No. 325 mesh screen, in a suitable device, such as a rotary kiln, maintained at 400° C. to 550° C., to form solid titanium di- and tri-

chlorides, which deposit on the surface of the aluminium, and vaporous aluminium chloride, which is separately recovered. The reaction is allowed to proceed to such an extent that the proportion of salt to unreacted aluminium is about 20% in excess of that required to react with all of the aluminium in a subsequent step based on the reactions:—



The solid product is then ground, thoroughly mixed, and agglomerated, for example by pelleting under pressure, after which it is heated in a countercurrent stream of inert gas at a temperature gradually increasing from 600° C. to 1100° C. In this step, the remainder of the aluminium reacts according to the equations shown above, producing solid titanium metal in compact form and vaporous aluminium chloride, which, together with a small amount of titanium tetrachloride, is removed in the inert gas stream. The aluminium chloride is separated from titanium tetrachloride by any desired known method, such as fractional condensation or crystallization of AlCl_3 from a solution in TiCl_4 . The excess salt in the material entering this stage disproportionates to titanium metal by one or both of the following reactions:



It is particularly advantageous to heat at least 1000° C. at a final temperature in the last heating stage because this not only ensures vaporizing off all chlorides, but it also provides a sintering effect or a substantial crystal growth which stabilizes the titanium metal formed, and reduces its pyrophoric or reactive characteristics. Although the melting point of titanium is much higher than these temperatures, the metal crystals which are formed by this reaction are very small and of very great surface, so that they coalesce into larger particles at the "sintering" temperatures above noted. This is advantageous in the case of pellets because the pellets become more compact and dense. It is especially advantageous in production of titanium metal powder because the metal is so fine as to be pyrophoric, i.e. to ignite spontaneously in air, and it is necessary either to compact it in some manner or to maintain it under an inert atmosphere. As stated, this necessity is obviated by heating to at least 1000° C. to effect sufficient crystal growth to stabilize the metal. The sintering step can be effected by increasing the temperature as described in the final heating stage, but if desired, finely divided Ti metal can be removed from this heating

stage under a protective atmosphere, e.g. under an inert gas, and sintered or compacted in a separate operation.

The inert gas employed herein is free of oxygen, nitrogen, moisture or other gases reactive with titanium metal. Such gas can be that obtainable in commerce and it is "gettered", e.g. by passing it over titanium metal, to remove all traces of reactive constituents before introduction into the reaction system. Where inert gas is employed in the first heating step, it tends to promote formation of a predominant or major portion of titanium dichloride. To initiate the reaction in the first heating stage the reactants are heated to at least 400° C., as further described above. The exact amount of Ti metal which is formed by heating the reaction mass in the first stage to 850° C. is not precisely known, but it is a minor amount, i.e. less than 50%, with respect to the total weight of the solid reaction product.

In the specification and claims, percentages are by weight unless otherwise indicated; and screen sizes, where shown, are U.S. Standards screens as described in Handbook of Chemistry and Physics, 32nd Edition, 1950-1951, Chemical Rubber Publishing Co., page 2797.

What we claim is:—

1. A process for making ductile titanium metal which comprises the steps of heating finely divided aluminium metal and titanium tetrachloride at a temperature of from 400° C. to 600° C. in the absence of a reactive gas to form vaporous aluminium chloride and a product comprising a lower chloride of titanium, removing the vaporous aluminium chloride, admixing finely divided aluminium metal with the titanium lower chloride, heating the mixture so obtained in an inert atmosphere at a temperature gradually increasing from 500° C. to 1100° C. to form titanium metal and vaporous aluminium chloride, withdrawing the vaporous aluminium chloride and separately recovering titanium metal.

2. A process as claimed in Claim 1, wherein the finely divided aluminium metal is employed in an amount in excess of that required to react with the titanium tetrachloride.

3. A process as claimed in Claim 2, wherein the excess finely divided aluminium metal is employed to form the aforesaid admixture with the titanium lower chloride.

4. A process as claimed in Claim 1, 2 or 3, wherein the mixture of aluminium metal and titanium lower chloride is agglomerated under pressure prior to the

heating thereof in an inert atmosphere.

5. A process as claimed in Claim 1, 2, 3 or 4, wherein the aluminium metal and titanium tetrachloride are reacted until slightly more than 50% of the aluminium has been reacted.

6. A process as claimed in any of the preceding Claims 2 to 5, wherein about 20% excess of the lower titanium chloride is heated with the remaining aluminium metal.

7. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein the finely divided aluminium metal and the titanium tetrachloride are heated in a reaction zone at a temperature of from 400° C. to 550° C.

8. A process as claimed in Claim 7, wherein the temperature in the reaction zone is increased in the absence of titanium tetrachloride to about 850° C. to form a small amount of finely divided titanium metal, the titanium lower chloride, titanium and unreacted aluminium metal are mixed and briquetted, after withdrawal of the vaporous aluminium chloride, and the briquetted material is heated in a stream of inert gas for constituting the aforesaid inert atmosphere.

9. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims, wherein the inert atmosphere is constituted by a noble gas.

10. A process as claimed in Claim 9, wherein the inert atmosphere consists of argon.

11. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein the product comprising a titanium lower chloride is predominantly titanium di-chloride.

12. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein the initial heating step is controlled so as to produce a solid reaction product containing excess aluminium metal, titanium dichloride and a minor proportion of titanium trichloride.

13. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein the finely divided aluminium metal employed is of a particle size substantially entirely passing through a No. 200 screen.

14. A process as claimed in Claim 13, wherein the finely divided aluminium metal employed is of a particle size substantially entirely passing through a No. 325 screen.

15. A process as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein the finely divided aluminium metal employed is free of oxygen.

16. A process of making ductile titanium metal substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

17. Ductile titanium metal when produced by a process substantially as claimed in any of the preceding claims.

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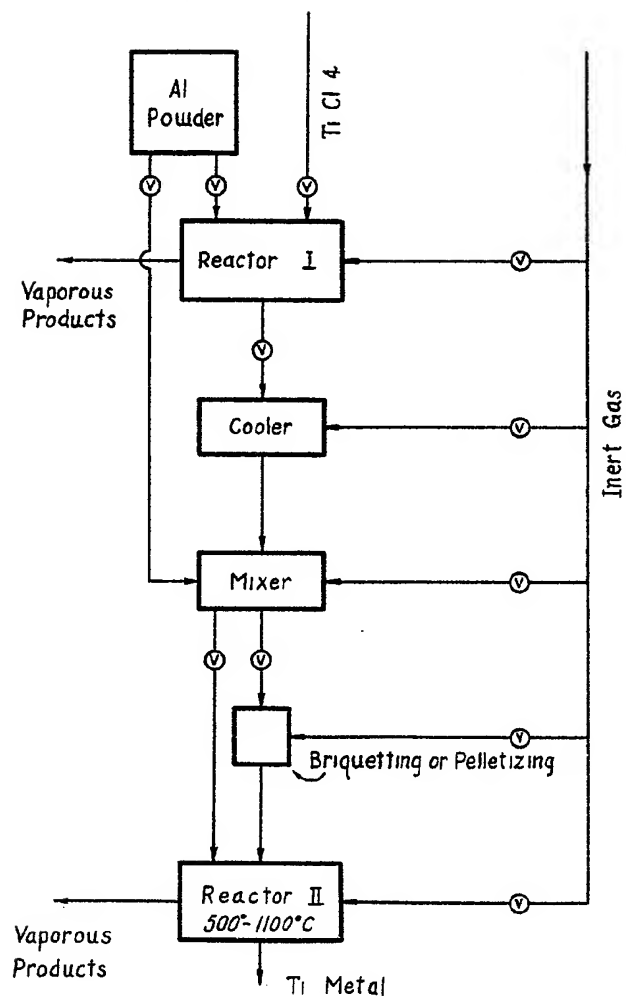
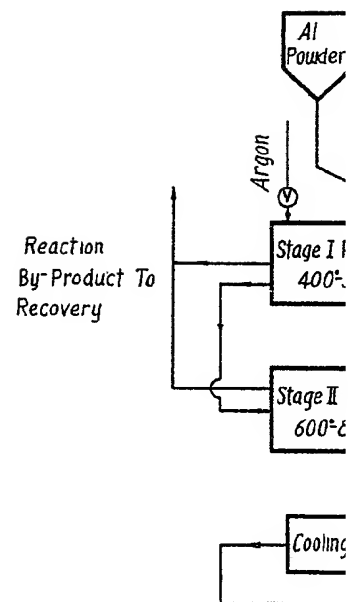


FIG. 1.



754,869 COMPLETE SPECIFICATION

3 SHEETS

This drawing is a reproduction of the Original on a reduced scale.

SHEETS 1 & 2

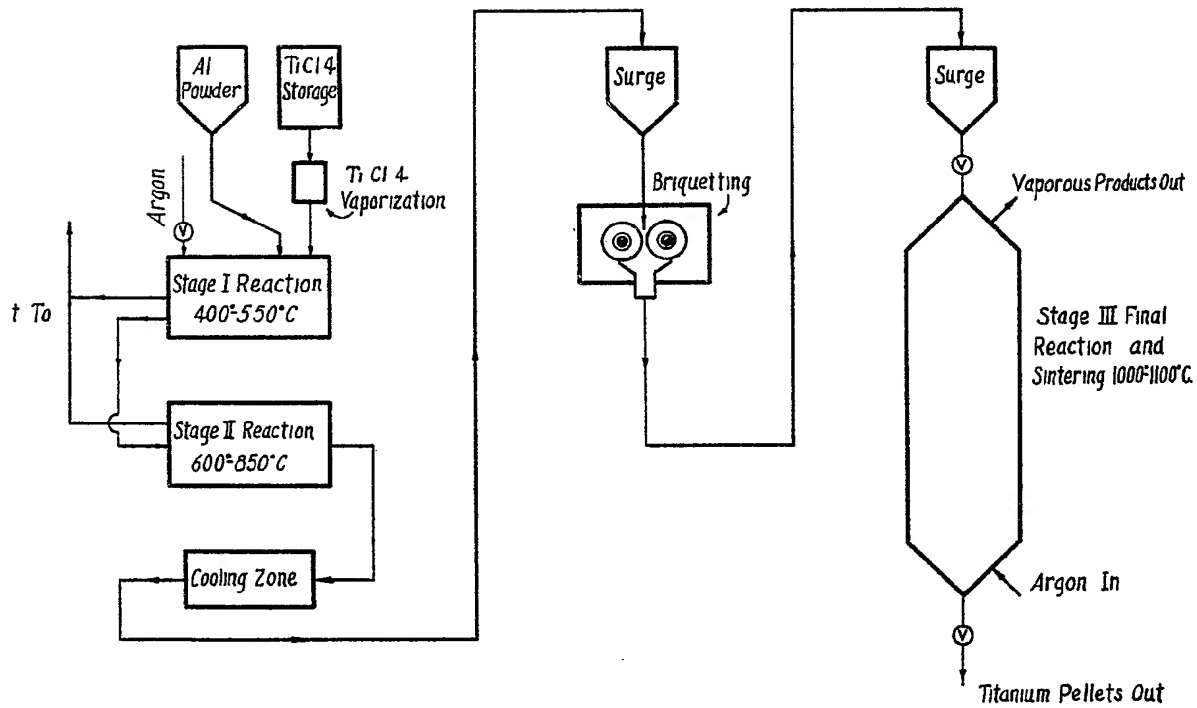
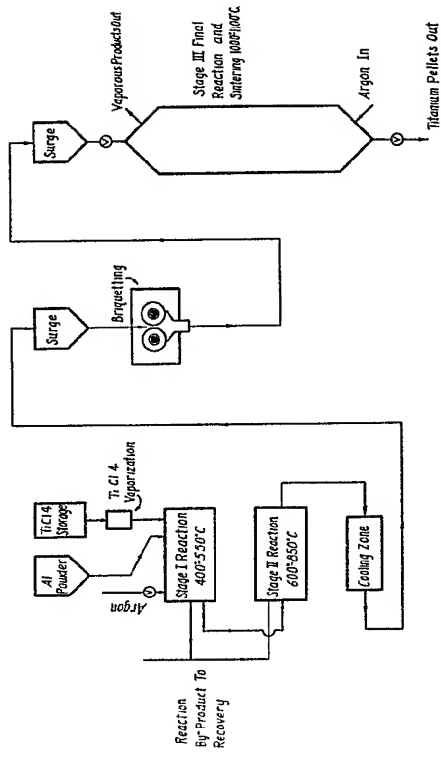
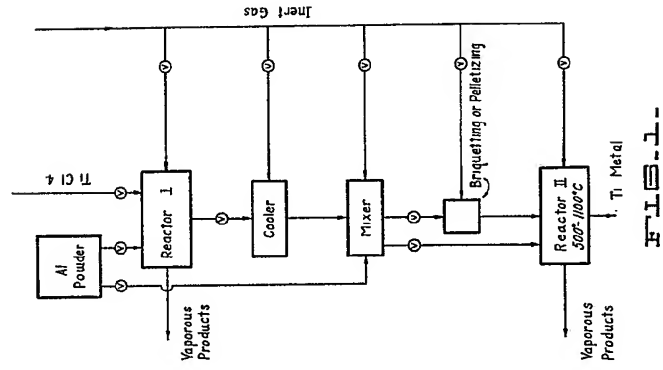


FIG. 2.



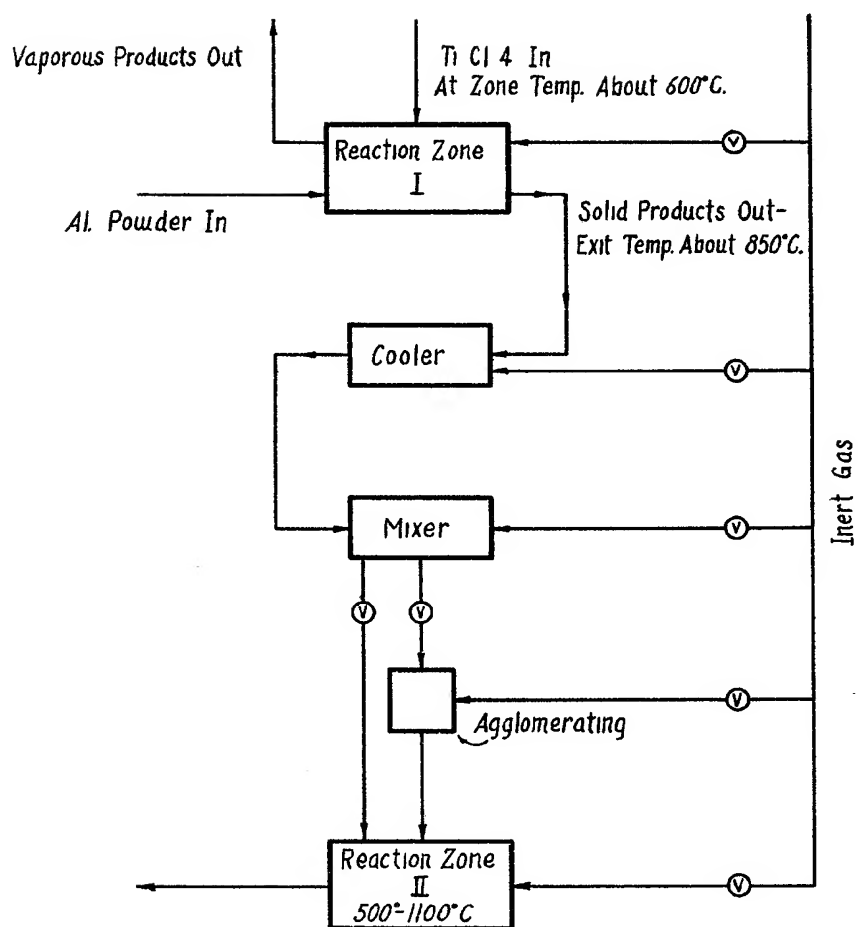


FIG. 3.